Paper Cuts

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Paper Cuts

by hanabiraaa

Summary

Senbazuru: the ancient Japanese practice of folding one thousand origami cranes in order to be granted a wish.

A short study of the dynamic between Mizuki and Shion.

Mizuki was no stranger to folklores and legends, and there was one that came to his mind not long after he was first brought to the stronghold of the Hashimoto clan.

Senbazuru. He had read of it in a book not long before his father's passing — the folding of a thousand origami cranes. If one could accomplish such a feat, it was said that they would be granted a wish.

At the time, Mizuki had attempted a few. The cranes were lopsided and awkward where they sat on the scuffed dresser in his bedroom. When his father died, and the men in gold and black showed up at his home, he didn't think to bring them with him. His mind had been elsewhere at the time, reeling from the oppressive reminders of his family's curse.

When he first met Lady Shion, he was briefly reminded of the cranes. The intricate designs in her hair evoked memories of beautifully patterned paper. Her manner of speech did as well. While she would remind him that she only wanted the best for him, her tone would be thin and sharp. It would leave Mizuki confused and stinging, but quickly, he got used to it, and the memories of cranes faded from his mind.

He wouldn't think of them again until his first training session with her. His knees were shaking and hands were clumsy, but she never faltered in her determination to teach him. To train him, to mold him to her ideals. She had known suffering, and though he was always awkward and scared and less than five feet tall — he was to be her retribution. She would taunt him with the reminder of his curse and his parents. "Don't you wish you could have protected them, Mizuki? Don't you wish to be strong?"

Most of the time he didn't think about it. But other nights, when he was alone and when he was sure nobody could hear him, all the built-up tiny paper cuts from Lady Shion's words would make him stain his pillow with tears. When he closed his eyes, endless images of origami cranes fluttered against his eyelids until he finally fell asleep.

Mizuki counted imaginary cranes every night until the season turned over into spring.

The cherry blossoms were blooming on his tenth birthday when Lady Shion summoned him to her office. Mizuki had assumed he was in trouble, and so Shion's proposal caught him completely off guard: "You may choose a gift, *obake-kun*." She spoke like it was a test. His answer seemed to catch her off guard as well; her head tilted robotically as he responded.

"A stack of origami paper, please."

He thought she'd berate him for requesting something so seemingly superficial. To his relief Shion only stared at him, nodded, and dismissed him.

He was even more surprised when a Hashimoto agent actually delivered the wrapped parcel to his bedroom door later that evening. There was no handwritten note with his name like his mother used to leave when he was small, but he barely paid that fact any mind. He had fully expected Lady Shion to dismiss his request entirely. And when he opened the parcel to reveal a thick stack of ornately decorated papers, he felt the flicker of an emotion he had nearly forgotten: excitement.

Mizuki had set to work right away. It took him a couple of times folding and unfolding before he remembered the correct technique. But eventually, he was face to face with an origami crane of his own creation once again. It was strange looking and wrinkled, but he felt a fondness for it. Like him, it was flawed, and like him, it stood anyway. Mizuki fell asleep that night with paper in his hands, surrounded by a flock of colorful cranes.

Mizuki quickly became dedicated to this new pasttime. It was something to do with his hands, and the repetitive motions soothed his often racing thoughts. After particularly rough training sessions Mizuki found that folding cranes helped calm him down. He wasn't sure if it was the process of the origami, or the designs on the paper, or the promise of a future wish, but the cranes helped distract him from his physical and emotional aches. And as he folded them, he made a point to focus on wishes instead of the painful thoughts. He hadn't yet settled on one, but many floated through his mind.

I wish Lady Shion wouldn't yell at me. I wish Lady Shion wouldn't hit me. I wish I could stop making Lady Shion mad.

I wish Lady Shion didn't exist. I wish my parents were still here.

I wish I could go be with them instead.

Before Mizuki knew it, the season turned over again. The sunlight that streamed through the windows of the stronghold, his prison, became hotter. Lady Shion's temper became shorter. Mizuki would hide his own cries under the cries of the cicadas outside. Yet, he never faltered in his determination to fold one thousand paper cranes. In fact, the cranes were getting harder to hide. He had a few hundred at this point — he did headcounts quite often — and they were overflowing from where he had been stashing them under his bed, in his wardrobe, and in his closet. And on the day that Toshiro-ojisan missed his first deadline, Mizuki had been busy.

With the day being uneventful, he had spent almost the entirety of his time folding paper cranes. They were scattered over his bed and floors. Mizuki had also come into possession of scissors and a ruler with enough convincing from a Hashimoto grunt. These he had been using to cut his paper into smaller sections. After all, he wasn't sure when he would be able to ask Lady Shion for another stack. Covered in cranes and paper scraps, Mizuki's room was a mess. He wasn't even fully aware of his surroundings, lost in his craft until the sound of sharp footsteps outside his door snapped him out of it.

Then the door flew open, and Mizuki dropped a half-folded crane. Lady Shion's eyes scanned the room.

"Why are you making such a mess?" Her throat pulsated with her distaste. "What is all this, *obake-kun?"*

He didn't know how to respond. Did she know of the legend? Was this another test? For a moment he dared to lie, but his fear gripped him threateningly. "I'm just… folding cranes, Lady Shion…"

Shion's gaze locked onto him then. Mizuki held his breath. His chest felt like it'd cave in as Shion began to cross the room. As she approached him, the amount of cranes on the floor became more numerous. He swallowed painfully as she paid them no regard; a couple of them were crushed beneath her heels before she stopped at Mizuki's bedside.

"You've been busy, haven't you?" Her paper cut voice was back again, and Mizuki felt cornered. He couldn't bring himself to move as she leered down at him. He never felt more small than when he was beside her. "In fact, I'd say you've been busier than Toshiro."

Mizuki pulled his knees to his chest at the mention of Toshiro's name. He didn't understand what she was getting at, bringing up the old smith. Toshiro-ojisan worked quite hard, in his eyes, and so he bowed his head gratefully at what he assumed was a compliment. "T-thank you… Lady Shion."

But that was the wrong answer. "Oh, you think that's a good thing?" she hissed. Mizuki flinched; dread welled up in him at the realization of his misstep. Lady Shion's eyes and throat cast an angry red glow down on him as she bristled. "How do you think I feel? I find out that my weaponsmith is slacking, and my *weapon* is… " Shion trailed off, emitting an annoyed grunt. She cast another glance around, her mechanics clicking as her head swiveled. Then she reached down and snatched a paper crane off the bed. Mizuki sat frozen as he watched her rip it up in front of him.

"Do you think I haven't heard of *senbazuru?"* Lady Shion whirled around, leaving Mizuki face to face with the snarling tiger that adorned her hair. His heart pounded in his ears; he could practically hear that tiger snarling at him as Shion began gathering paper cranes in her arms. "Do you think I'm a fool?" As the sound of tearing paper filled the room again, Mizuki couldn't stop himself. He began to cry; he hated this. He hated himself, he hated the cranes. Why did he ever think this would be a good idea?

As soon as she saw his tears, Lady Shion stopped. "Why are you crying over paper? *You're* the one who hurt *me.*" She tilted her head again, coldly watching Mizuki's shoulders shake. "How could you do this? Making a mess of all these papers because you think you'll get a wish? What could you *possibly* have to wish for when I give you *everything?"*

"I'm sorry, Lady Shion." It was the only thing he could think to say — his usual mantra, every time he messed up. "I'm sorry."

"What were you going to wish for, *obake-kun?*"

Mizuki hiccuped. He didn't want to tell her. It was supposed to be *his* project, *his* wish. These were *his* cranes. *His* creations. He had dissociated away countless hours making these. He had folded all the leftover scraps of love he still held for his deceased parents into them. They were the only things that had truly felt like his own possession since he had come into Lady Shion's care. And now, she was using them to break him.

But he was using them to hurt her, wasn't he? In the back of his mind he wondered if maybe he deserved this after all.

"Don't ignore me, little brat!"

Before he could open his mouth to issue another *I'm sorry Lady Shion* her hands were on him. She grabbed his left arm, closed her metal fingers around it, ignored his cries as the joints pinched his skin. He was no stranger to discipline, but this time he simply couldn't gather himself. And so he closed his eyes, where he saw cranes again — countless colorful cranes, corrupted by every bad thought he's ever had about Lady Shion, tainted by every wish he'd considered making against her. And worst of all, cursed by his own hands. He should have known that even his cranes wouldn't be safe from that incessant curse.

He was pulled off the bed, made to stand amongst the scraps of paper. Shion held his left wrist in one hand and picked up his ruler in the other. She was still shouting at him about the cranes, about the wish, about Toshiro and some deadline. Mizuki was too busy bracing himself at the uncomfortable way she held out his arm. Then, her words were drowned out entirely by the searing pain that radiated from the ruler that landed repeatedly against his skin.

Despite the fact that many of his cranes were now ruined, Mizuki thought of a wish one last time. He'd selfishly cling onto it in this moment. He'd repeat it like a mantra in his head until Lady Shion decided she was done with him again.

I wish she'd just kill me already.

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